

3. CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Ranya Khan: It takes time for newcomers to Canada to fully adapt and acculturate to their new home. The feelings of excitement and anticipation for what lies ahead for new immigrant families is sometimes overshadowed by feelings of loss and confusion and experiences of discrimination. Although not all families have the same experiences and same feelings, each person must adjust to this new culture. The immigrant families experiences and process of adjustment are often aided if the individuals they encounter show cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Urdu Speaking Parent: Nothing makes sense! At that time, when we first arrived because there is such a difference with our religion, and where we're from, between Pakistan and Canada the way of life and culture, there is a big difference and this makes it difficult. One can't understand anything! We're thinking, where have we arrived?

Ranya Khan: Another Somali parent views knowledge of language as key to a parents acceptance by the school.

Somali Speaking Parent: If the person speaks the language and has knowledge, then that person is respected because they know the rules, the culture and the habits, they have more resources, their level of education and that of the teachers' is the same and they can communicate with the teacher easier. But if the person does not speak the language or does not understand the system and is black the children and parents will not be accepted in the schools. Because I went many times to the schools to helping other parents, even when I am standing there and talking to them if the teacher sees that you are knowledgeable he will respect you, but if he sees that you are not knowledgeable then he will show superiority. I believe that whether you are black or white, none of us were born to become gang members. Everybody has equal rights; this is a country of opportunity. But your colour, the language you speak, and the way you dress can negatively impact your life. The lives of many black people who came to this country before us and who are still here have been destroyed. Although there were black people before us, when you go to schools you will see that all the school staff are white, you will not see one black person. So what happened to them? They did not come to Canada as refugees, they came here as slaves but we Somalis face the same problems that were faced by them.

Ranya Khan: While knowing the language is a powerful tool for newcomer parents, the school's ability to welcome the parents is also valuable in attempting to integrate parents into their child's schooling.

Somali Speaking Parent: How you are welcomed and perceived by the school is very important. Often teachers and principals are confrontational or lines of communication are not presented. For example, you and I speak the same language, but if you do not want to communicate with me then we will not have a good relationship. There are times when teachers reject parents. When they see the way you are dressed they just assume that you don't know the language. I used to tell them, I understand you and you don't need to speak that loud to me, so it depends on how they welcome you.

Ranya Khan: Some parents may feel marginalized and helpless because of their low-income status. They might have concerns that their children are experiencing discrimination based on the neighbourhoods where they live. Parents are fearful that their socioeconomic status may result in their child receiving an inferior education compared to children living in middle to high income neighbourhoods.

Caribbean Community Parent: I don't know, maybe a lot of my friends might think I shouldn't say that, but I think when you are in a low-class area, the people look at you in a different way entirely. I don't know if you guys notice it or have felt it, but there are always talks about the area that you live in and I think that's wrong. You shouldn't judge someone by if they could live better they would, and make a better place for their children. But it's better that you can live in an area that you can afford than you get into one and it cause problems, you might be homeless in maybe three months or a year, and that you have food on your table for your kids and a roof over their heads. But a lot of people, a lot of teachers, they think that because you're in, well the Jamestown area that, but I know a lot of children that is, that live here and their ministers, and she has a son, a doctors, she has a son that get a scholarship. The children, you know what, I don't think they should judge them, and that but they does.

Somali Speaking Parent: In Canada, the teacher is not responsible for the students. There is an obvious difference between the students who live in good neighbourhoods and whose parents are educated and between those students who live in bad neighbourhoods with low-income parents. The teachers in the good neighbourhoods, where people are educated and employed try hard to educate the students on the curriculum, but in certain neighbourhoods where black people or immigrants live, and where there are those who do not know the system, the teachers take advantage of these people and they don't teach the students well. So if the parents are neglecting the child and the teachers are neglecting the students, that's where the children have a lot of problems.

Ranya Khan: Many immigrant children to Canada are faced with having to negotiate their cultural identities. A cultural divide between children and parents may result in children feeling ashamed of their home culture, and parents feeling concerned with how they can successfully incorporate the school's culture, without abandoning their home culture.

Somali Speaking Parent: When the children are young they do not understand the difference between their parents and other parents at the school. But when they grow up and are in Middle or High school they understand the difference in the way their parents dress and they do not want their parents with different styles of dress to come to school. I have heard many kids ask, "Mom, can you not come to my school?" It is not that your child hates you, at home you are still their mother, but the other kids at school will tease them. That is what they try to avoid.

Arabic Speaking Parent: The child is the relationship between the school and the parents. The child's personality is different at home than at school. He acts with his teacher differently than with his parents. The fact that he comes from a different culture to a new environment results in difficulties between the school and the parents - the child is in the middle of that. The parents want the child to follow their way and the school wants the child to follow its way and the Canadian culture and environment that surround him. We are suffering, not just the school. We

are too. We want our children to become like us and that is very difficult because they live in a different society than the one we were raised in; absolutely different from the background that we came from. With these children we have to find a compromise between the school and us. How? We must understand the children's basic needs in this society, and give them things from our culture. It will not be something simple because they are taking most things from their school and bringing them home to us.

Ranya Khan: How well an immigrant family adjusts to Canada and their ease in getting involved in the child's education depends on several factors.

Educator: But in terms of some parents being more involved than others it all depends on their own level of education. What, for example, some of them they've had very successful careers back home and they are not only updating their education here but they're also taking English classes and they're very involved. So that basic parents level of education, their comfort with the culture here, so if they've had some experience, some exposure back home to different cultures, they're more comfortable learning the new language in with different people. So that plays a role, so that definitely plays a role in terms of some parents being more comfortable than others.

Caribbean Community Parent: You have some teachers that because of their cultural background, they don't, they just don't care, because I've seen that. They don't really try, if your child is in class, the child don't really understand, they just don't bother. And if they know you're a single parent they use it against the child too, some of them. So that's why the parent have to really attend those parent-teacher meetings and really take part in the child's life at school. Because if you leave it to, you have some teachers that try their best, because this middle school here I couldn't complain. But that high school there, it was a problem at one stage. So you really have to go in and talk all the time, call to make sure everything is ok.

Ranya Khan: Those families who come to Canada as refugees face specific challenges that other immigrant families, who voluntarily chose to leave their home countries may not face. These newcomer families are concerned that their refugee status is a factor in their relationship with their child's teacher. The teachers in this study are aware that refugee families may face additional hardships and challenges, because of the circumstances that led to their arrival in Canada.

Somali Speaking Parent: We came here as refugees and my own experience is that some teachers are good. But some teachers might see me as a refugee mom who came to this country and does nothing, even though all parents are equal. If I was back home and coming from a country that had peace, the teacher might perceive me differently than the way they see me here. When I make my own comparison about the way that teachers view parents, some teachers will not give me the same rights that they give to non-immigrant/refugee parents and that hurts us.

Educator: They're leaving their home, so that's the first loss to them, and they're coming to another place and that's a new discovery for them. As we mentioned before, all the sacrifices they've done, they must pay off. They need to see the light at the end of the tunnel to make the journey worthwhile, so they live in constant fear, "Will I be able to make it?", "Will I live for something or for nothing?", and this really plays a huge role in their psychological health, really

throughout the years. In terms of this area of this community, the refugee field isn't advantaged, they feel they don't have papers sometimes, they feel they need social support, they need others, they're less worthy and do not have the same status they had at home. Most of them are doctors, lawyers, engineers, in this community especially, but they lose all of that. With that comes a loss of identity, "Who am I?", "How long can I go on accepting jobs that are not meant to be mine?", "How long can I go in terms of wages, life, living standards?", and things like that. How does it affect us? The moral of the parents affect us. If they're confident and positive it makes communication much easier and smoother. If they're reluctant, scared about sharing their feelings about what's going on with them, then it makes the communication harder, because they have their own issues to deal with, their own psychological turmoil to go through.

Ranya Khan: As parents become better informed about the Canadian school system and are made to feel welcome by the school, they begin to accept this new system of education. The imperative cultural adjustment reaches a level of acceptance and understanding that may have not existed before.

Urdu Speaking Parent: Overall it has been good. Muslims are treated well, especially when we have Eid or Ramadan. They have good arrangements in the secondary school for our children, they have prayer rugs, our girls can wear scarves, and they give you time to pray. Other than that, during Ramadan they have special parties for Muslims. It's very good, this cooperation. They understand our religion and look upon it favourably. However, there are always one or two, there are people of many cultures here, so there are those who make fun of us.

Ranya Khan: The teachers role in providing an atmosphere of understanding and cultural sensitivity is crucial for parents and students to feel accepted and comfortable.

Educator: For instance in the first week of school a couple of my kids said I had spiky hair, and a couple of them were like "My mom's not too sure about you." "But your mom hasn't met me." "Yeah, but I told her you had spiky hair and she doesn't know about a teacher with spiky hair." You know and many of my girls wear the hajib and are all covered and so when we came to the first set of interviews I was very conscious of the fact that I had to kind of tone things down, and I tried to wear a long skirt. Just so that when parents came in they weren't in total shock, and also just out of respect, because a lot of the women came in covered and I thought that's, you know. But there are other teachers that are like, "Oh I don't do anything different, they just have to deal with it." And I just thought, I don't know I think maybe because I am a parent and I know even going in to see my kid's teachers the first time, you judge them by what they're wearing and how they talk to you. So I think it's important for us to make people feel comfortable.

Ranya Khan: The specific strategies that schools employ to make sure their students' parents are informed can help contribute to a family's cultural adjustment. Providing information to parents about the school system in Canada and a specific school's policies and procedures can help in breaking down cultural and language barriers, and to bridge the communication gap.

Educator: We will speak about all education systems in Canada, we explain everything starting from the school bells, cafeteria, schedules, parent-teacher interview nights and how to prepare the kids for meeting with their new friends. And after that we actually support parents and

students in their everyday life, we have meetings in any urgent situation, we are here to help them with connection with teachers and maybe with attendance or a different situation which can happen in school.

Educator: They usually are sent home translated into different languages depending on the community, or they will tell you they are 5 different translations or languages in the office if you need one parents, for your classroom, come and pick up as many as you need, nowadays you don't see that. Another element which I went and looked into a few weeks ago was the staff handbook, or any binder in the office where you can find information about the different ethnic groups. I think if we are interested at some point, and we realize we have a child coming from the Tamil community and, which I had, and the student is absent for a few days and they had their religious reasons, and I have no clue about what that religious reason may be. If we had any one handout or two, in any binder somewhere where I could go and read, all right as a brief summary they could be absent on the following days because, we know about the rites for Muslim people, we know about Easter and Christmas, but we really don't know about the others. So I think this is something that will also help us understand the culture. It does not have to be long, I could be one page.

Educator: Just recently we had a night where we invited families from Sri Lanka to come in because they were experiencing some difficulty here in figuring out what to do with their kids and the expectations they had at home were different than we had here at school. We had great support from the settlement worker who spoke the language and great turnout from the parents, they're really concerned about their kids and the way they're seen in the city as, you know, some gang member and things like that. So they're concerned that their children are going to go the wrong way, so there's a great deal of stress on them, because these are young children, and they're just worried about the way their culture is being seen.

Educator: Was this initiated by the parents or the settlement worker or?

Educator: The school. When you start to see a pattern, all of a sudden we went, wow you know what, we're seeing these kinds of behaviours with this group of children, what can we be doing to support parents so that they understand that this really isn't very productive.

Educator: We've done a couple of evening sessions called "Empowering parents", about the educational system: how does it work? what does it mean? And we've had them have the ability through translators, we have there to submit questions to a panel, any questions, "Why does a child get suspended?" for example, "What do they do that gets them suspended?", "What does it mean to get expelled?" Simple things that often we take for granted that people know and understand the terminology, education is rife with jargon and terminology, and those of us in it sometimes get caught up in that jargon and we realize that, you know what to some people this sounds like a different language when you start talking about IPRCs and IEPs and all of that kind of stuff, I mean I have to and I've been in a long time. Sometimes I have to think, well what does that stand for? Like what are we talking about here, is that good or is that bad? So I can only imagine how difficult it is for people outside of education and especially people who English is not a first language for. So we need to provide that information for parents, we need to take the mystery and the mystique out of what the system is about.

Ranya Khan: Parents appreciate the willingness of schools and teachers to learn more about the different cultures and their students. A teacher who acknowledges their students' ethno-cultural background helps to establish a sensitive and a respectful learning environment that allows individual students to feel proud of their home culture and teaches all student to respect the linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity that exists throughout Canada.

Arabic Speaking Parent: I do agree. The schools are very accommodating and very welcoming. I've tried with my other kids. I've visited the schools many, many times and explained our needs to the extreme, but there is a huge role on us, the Arab parents, which we are not doing, especially Muslims; the obvious Muslims who wear hijabs or wear beards. Because after September 11, they faced a lot of disdain and racism from the outside society for a while. Now this has diminished a lot. Personally, I did not face these problems because it is not obvious from my looks that I am Muslim. But I know a lot of people and have heard that they were looked down upon. This is not specifically related to schools, which tended to be understanding, but was generally evident in society. Every time we lent a hand at school, we found cooperation. Always, always. But also the teachers are so overloaded, they have so much to do. I did ask them to learn more about our background but I know for sure there is only so much they can do. Time and effort are limited. I hold the ESL department more accountable for learning about the cultures of their students. They are the experts. They need to hear and learn more about our stories, culture, and recommendations to follow.

Ranya Khan: Parents and teachers work together to ensure that students are receiving an education that considers their diverse needs and acknowledges their diverse backgrounds. A lasting solution to bridging the gap that exists between immigrant families and schools is if both parents and teachers work together to understand one another, to learn more about the cultural factors that make each community unique.

Educator: I think as teachers we are all striving to be informed and it is important to get to know our community, the parents in our community and try to be as sensitive as we can towards their own needs and cultural backgrounds. It is going to take a lot of patience and a lot of tolerance and flexibility from our sides, but if we the teachers don't do it, we the educators don't do it, then who can do it? We are known, we are chosen to be teachers because of the personal qualities that we all have, and I strongly believe in all the teachers.

Arabic Speaking Parent: I hope this kind of work continues, and encourages more parents to get involved. They are doing their job. I like this. I commend it. I hope they think about how, I personally don't know, how to get more parents involved. For the interest of the children, the society, and the parents, for the best interest of all. I just want to tell the teachers here in Canada, please don't look down on our culture. We are people who have an excellent history. You can learn a lot about our culture if you ask or read. We are people who have values, morals, principles. We are people who have nothing to do with those causing bombs, the terrorists, we have nothing to do with them. We did not vote for them. They caused the bombing, and are responsible for their own actions. There are people in your country such as criminals, who you are not responsible for, so don't make us and our kids pay for others faults or mistakes. That's my final petition for teachers. Please know more about our culture.

